THE BIRTH OF HOPE
Luke 1:26-36; Romans 3:24-25
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The story begins on the beaches of Costabel, the hour before dawn, in that eery half light that makes it quite impossible to distinguish sea from sky. Tourists, as always, are out early with flashlight, and professional shell collectors as well. Back at the hotels are large outdoor kettles for cooking away the hidden occupants of the shells to prepare them for their future on New York coffee tables. The one telling the story surveys this scene, observes the beach littered with the "debris of life," living creatures cast up by the sea without reason or intent, accidental disasters, torn from life. It is a grim ritual, when looked at objectively.

On down the beach, framed by an early morning rainbow is another figure, bending over, reaching down, examining and then throwing something into the sea. Approaching, the storyteller sees him stooped over a starfish. "It's still alive," I ventured. "Yes...he said, "It may live...if the offshore pull is strong enough...The stars throw well. One can help them."

"I turned as I neared a bend in the coast and saw him toss another star, skimming it far out over the ravening and tumultuous water. For a moment, in the changing light, the sower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had, at any rate, the posture of a god." (Loren Eisely, The Star Thrower, p. 172)

The story is entitled The Star Thrower, and it was written by the late Loren Eisely, Professor of Anthropology and the History of Science at the University of Pennsylvania, a poet-philosopher-scientist and prolific writer. Eisely grappled with important and difficult matters of life, death, nature, fate, meaning, in a way that earned him the attention of scholars all over the world.

Hope is the subject of The Star Thrower: not the simple hope for good weather or a propitious turn of events, but deep, philosophic hope. The kind of hope upon which our fragile humanity rests. Sociologists tell us that we can't live for long without hope, at least as human beings. Take hope away and people become desperate. Without hope something essential to the fabric of society evaporates, order disappears, chaos emerges. "Senseless violence" we call it when we see it, and that is what it is, although it is more accurately described as "hopeless violence." Governmental commissions studied it, described it, warned about it after the cities exploded a dozen years ago. The bottom line in those reports, you may recall, was hope - or the lack of it.

Human beings are amazingly resilient, capable of standing up under and living through unimaginably difficult circumstances - so long as there is hope. Scotsman, Ernest Gordon, former Dean of the Chapel at Princeton, has written about his experience in a Japanese Prisoner of War Camp during World War II. Through the Valley of the Kwai, is the name of the book and in it Gordon describes the gradual deterioration, physical, mental, spiritual - among the prisoners as the blunt reality of their isolated jungle camp sunk in. There was very little possibility that anyone knew where they were, whether they were dead or alive... Slowly the vestiges of the cultured, civilized British life eroded. Men began to be selfish, unkind, cruel - and at the same time unkempt, uncaring. The turning point came when an allied plane was sighted. Hope was reborn and according to Gordon's account, the effect was dramatic and immediate. Life had possibilities, therefore purpose. Order resumed. So did kindness, caring, a little pride. Humanity made a comeback with an assist by hope. For Gordon, it was a religious experience; an encounter with a new idea of God as a reality in the future, beckoning, calling, a God of Hope.

Humanity seems to depend on hope. Physicians know the physiological reality of hope in the process of healing. Sociologically, hope is related to civilization, order. The lack of hope, the fading of hope, in the middle class society we inhabit is reflected in the two common dynamics of nostalgia and materialism. If the future looks dismal, one's attention is more satisfyingly invested in the past. My guess is that historians will one day be amused at our obsession with the decades of the forties and fifties. I know many people who sound as if they have given up on the future and have decided that all meaning, all goodness, all gentleness and hope exist only in memory. Next to sex, it is the most powerful motivator in the market place today. The fading of hope shows up as nostalgia and then, less graciously, in a cynical hedonism. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The trouble with that, obviously, is that more often than not you don't die, at least not tomorrow. But the sentiment has power. A popular song a few years ago put it plainly:

> "If that's all there is, then let's keep on dancing. If that's all there is, let's break out the booze and have us a ball."

Christianity is about hope. Christian faith is essentially hopeful. The Christian life is fundamentally a stance of hope in the face of long odds, like throwing a star back to the sea in the midst of the debris of death. Isaiah, for instance. Isaiah, writing to a nation whose immediate future could not have looked more dismal. Caught in the middle of an international power struggle, the options in front of Judah were all terrible. What happened, in fact, was defeat, the leveling of Jerusalem and the temple, and a generation - long exile in Babylon. Isaiah wrote:

> "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isaiah 35:1)

HOPE by Bible

Centuries later, that same people, captive again, this time in their own land, occupied by Roman troops, and one of their unmarried peasant girls had a vision.

> "Hail, O favored one...
> you will conceive and bear a son
> and you shall call his name Jesus.
> He will be great, and will be called
> the Son of the Most High:
> ...he will reign forever
> and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:27ff)

A generation passed. Nero decided the Christ followers sprinkled throughout his troubled empire would be adequate scapegoats and so he called them traitors and fed them to hungry lions or burned them alive. Huddled, in Corinth Ephesus, Philippi, the catacombs of the capital itself, they drew courage from a martyred preacher named Paul who had written:

> "For in this hope we were saved....we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience..."

Those early Christians knew, perhaps more clearly than anyone since, that their faith was not going to protect them from harm. They would not recognize popular versions of hope as a God-given parking place, or special treatment by the management of the universe. They had seen too many of their saints thrown to the lions to engage in adolescent theologizing. Their hope was more profound than that.

Paul wrote - and they read, avidly -

> "Who shall separate us from the love of God?
> Shall tribulation, famine, peril, sword...No
> ...In all these, we are more than conquerors through
> him that loved us."

In our day that emphasis has been renewed in the Theology of Hope. It's most popular proponent, Jurgen Mortmann, writes, "From first to last, and not merely in epilogue, Christianity is hope, forward looking and forward moving." (Theology of Hope, p. 16)

Hope in the Bible is not an other - worldly escape from a grim future. Rather it is a bright light burning right in the middle of the present, however bleak it may be. Contemporary Theology of hope tries to make some sense of the Gospel in the midst of situations that seem to deny it, ignore it, or vigorously oppose it. It is an idea that comes into focus for us in the Advent Season. The liturgies and rituals of the church in Advent all look forward to the day of the Lord, the coming again of God. That surprises us occasionally. I can recall as a child wondering why the music of Advent was about yearning, longing, mourning in exile, in a minor key. We want Christmas as a joyful anniversary celebration. But the church's focus is forward in Advent, ahead, future. The problem is that we get the rhetoric of the second coming. We can't get past the images of the Middle Ages, the gaudy return of the Lord and end of the age. But that's not it, at all. Advent looks ahead to the celebration of the birth and then the coming again, and again, and again of a God who has said eloquently and ultimately that earth is where he will be, and that future will find him always present with love, reconciliation and therefore, hope.

The hope of faith is not serenity, peacefulness only. Moltmann observes: "Faith, whenever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience..." (op. cit., p. 21) Hopeful people are always pressing for change - in the world and, as importantly, in their own lives. People possessed by the Hope of Christ are not often satisfied, patient people, but rather, the very ones who, in his name, are out on the edge, pressing, urging, working for the wholeness, righteousness he promised in situations as political, economic and social as the census in the midst of which he was born.

There is a sense in which the vocabulary of hope is an alien language, in the same way that the Christmas Gospel is imprisoned in myth and tradition. Hope, in our society, must go up against a very fashionable cynicism - cynicism with very proper credentials, cool, brittle, blase, detached, it has always been fashionable. Shakespeare, in Richard II:

> "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
> and tell sad stories of the death of kings."

Or H.G. Wells, late in life:

> "It now seems to me that the whole universe is utterly bored by the whole species of mankind. (See Halford Luccok, A Sprig of Holly)

Or Albert Camus,:

> "Hope as a rule makes many a fool. Hence we try to remain on the solid ground of reality, to think clearly and not hope any more." (Moltmann, op. cit., p. 23)

Or the wealthiest nation in the history of the human race, in the process of deciding that the best it can do for its future, its institutions, its dreams and visions is build a better bomber.

Hope has to go up against some very fashionable cynicism, which always masquerades as realism.

Hope is durable. Hope may be the best evidence of God. It keeps appearing in unlikely places; sublime and ridiculous. John Updike wrote a short story, "The Carol Sing" describing the annual event in the town hall of Tarbox, Massachusetts, with dusty piano and the doughty, dour citizens lifting strained voices..."Why do we?" he asks..."Why do we come every year as sure as the solstice to carol these antiquities?"

(Short Stories and Poems, p. 147) Why do I stop raking leaves or pulling weeds when the carrillon of Christ Lutheran breaks through my daydreams with "Fairest Lord Jesus," to listen and hum a few bars? Why do I listen for familiar strains of "O Little Town" nearly lost in the hurried voices, cash registers and car horns of High Street?

Hope is durable, strong in us, always looking for an opportunity to emerge. It is so strong that tragedy seems to call it out of us. Henry Longfellow, near devastated at the news that his son was wounded in the Army of the potomac, took up pen and wrote:

"I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play.

And in despair I bowed my head
There is no peace on earth, I said.
For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,
God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men."

Hope is strong in us. It keeps popping up in unlikely circumstances. In Isaiah's dreams of crocus blooming in the desert: in persecuted Christians become conquerors in the face of death, in the poignant sense of the future which happens everytime birth occurs and we are privileged to hold in our arms - a baby - a person - a future.

Hope is strong and reborn in the dark night, by the light of a bright star hurled into history. It is the birth of hope which we celebrate in the nativity of Jesus Christ. It is the birth of the Savior.....

The man returned to his room, after watching the star thrower. He lay all day on his bed, wrestling with fate and death, and the grim scenario played out on the beach of Costabel each morning before dawn. And then he decided....

"I picked and flung another star. Perhaps far outward on the rim of space a genuine star was similarly siezed and flung. I could feel the movement in my body. It was, like a sowing - the sowing of life on an infinitely gigantic scale...

"I picked up a star whose tubed feet ventured timidly among my fingers while, like a true star, it cried soundlessly for life. I saw it with an unaccustomed clarity and cast far out. With it, I flung myself as forfeit, for the first time, into some unknown dimension of existence.

"Somewhere, my thought persisted, there is a hurler of stars, and he walks, because he chooses, always in desolation but not in defeat." (ob. cit., p. 185)

And the angel said...
behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son
and you shall call his name Jesus...
And he will reign forever. AMEN.

STARS ARE FOR THROWING IT AT (CCSF FILCOM

12/27/81 (SER. FILE)

GOD: Yes, Gabe, what is it?

GABE: This letter came this morning, Your Excellency.

GOD: I assume you've read it.

Gave: Yes, Your Excellency.

God: And do you have any recommendation?

Gabe: Well, Your Excellency, since the matter is rather personal, I thought it best to have you read the letter and then we could discuss possible responses.

God: Hmm. Yes. Well, I suppose you're right. OK. Let's have it.

(Gabe hands him the letter - God reads:)

Dear God,

Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are you better do something quick.

Love, Harriet Ann

Am I real, indeed! I am Reality Itself! Without me Nothing is Real! That Tillich fellow said I was the Ground of all Being.

Gabe: Calm down, Your Excellency. I warned you that this was a rather personal matter. We must keep a clear head and decide what is to be done.

God: Right, Gabe. A clear head. Do you think this is serious? Are people really asking this question?

Gabe: Oh, yes, Your Excellency. In fact a book has been written called, <u>The Search for God</u>.

God: Hm. Didn't know I was lost.

Gabe: Furthermore, Your Excellency, the seriousness of the matter can hardly be exaggerated. A world in which your Reality seems to have disappeared will not stay empty long. It will soon be filled with all kinds of substitutes. There will be

persons and things, causes and movements pumped up into being substitute gods, and then the whole enterprise will go wrong. People will quarrel and suffer, they will oppress and exploit and even kill each other in the name of their gods. They will become evil.

God: That's why she said, "Do something quick."

Gabe: Of course.

God: But what?

Gabe: I was hoping you would have some ideas.

God: But isn't that what I have theologians for?

Gabe: I don't think Harriet Ann wants theology, Your Excellency.

God: I see. You suggest action, and not just talk. All right. I'll wipe out the human race and start over.

Gabe: But, Your Excellency, you made them that, remember. You insisted on making them free creatures, even after my office warned you about the risks. Remember - you wanted them to love you and one another. But if they are really free to love you, then they are also free to ignore you and hate one another, or to love something in your place. It was your idea to make love and freedom go together. Even if you started over you wouldn't change that, would you?

God: Glad you thought of that. But it doesn't solve the problem. "Do something quick," she wrote. How about a miracle. Something to dazzle people. That should convince them of my reality.

Gabe: I'm sorry to be a nuisance with these objections, Your Excellency. But one of your own theologians, a preacher in Columbus, Ohio, USA, tells his congregation that miracles really don't convince anyone. People only say, "Do it again, slowly," and we are right back where we started.

God: This is becoming more difficult than I thought. Do something quick, she said.

Gabe: If I might be so bold as to suggest it, Your Excellency, perhaps the problem lies in the word, "quick".

God: You mean it's bad English? It should be "quickly?"

Gabe: No. I mean it's a bad idea. It should be "slowly."

God: Brilliant. Of Course. Why didn't I think of that? Slowly. That changes everything. I'll go myself. I'll become one of them.

Gabe: Brilliant, Yourself, Your Excellency. Only God could think of that. But how will you do it?

God: Well, that's where your suggestion of doing something slowly triggered an idea. I'll start the way they do. I'll be born!

Gabe: A tremendous idea! But do You realize what that means, Your Excellency? You are not talking about magic, apparitions, visions -- here one moment, gone the next. You are talking about total commitment.

God: I know, I know. Let's get on with it.

Gabe: Now, just stop and think a moment. Remember, no one builds a tower without first counting the cost.

God: That's a good line. Remind me to have one of my speech writers use it sometime.

Gabe: I just want You to be sure You know what becoming one of them means. Once You get involved with them, You will be subjecting Yourself to intrigue and accusation, to suffering, pain, sorrow, to all the evil things people do to each other. Once You enter that mess, I'm afraid there is only one exit. You will have to experience - dare I mention it - death.

God: True, true. But is there really any other way? If they don't experience my Reality, they have gone wrong. And if they have gone wrong, then the question whether I am real is no longer the one they need answered. My Reality is not their need. My commitment is.

Gabe: Of course. Becoming one of them is the ultimate investment in Your creation. You will be taking their history into Yourself. Their suffering, their evil, their death will become part of Your experience.

God: And if they trust <u>my love</u>, they will become free to love again.

Gabe: But that will only add to the risk You took when You made them in the first place.

God: I know. I know. Nothing else has a chance of saving them. And who really knows where and when and how many of them will respond. Maybe even some in that Columbus, Ohio, you mentioned earlier.

Gabe: Love and risk go together, Your Excellency.

God: Thanks for getting me to think about "slowly", Gabe. Love is not quick. It is slow. It grows and builds and ripens over the years. It is the investment of Myself. It means hanging in there - no matter what.

Gabe: But that is what Your Reality is.

God: Now I want you to handle all the publicity, the press releases, the media.

Gabe: I think I have an idea already. The first press release will begin, "In those days a decree went out..."